

## *Winifred Durfee*



*"When one is weary, the thought of laying down one's burden is pleasing, and one buoys up one's spirit with dreams of leisure for literary pursuits and travel in order to keep from sinking into melancholy over parting with so many delightful associations."*

*-Winifred Durfee, on leaving Hope College*

Winifred Hackley Durfee, Hope College's second Dean of Women, exerted an influence over the women in her care during her twenty-seven years at Hope. From 1909 to 1936, Durfee held "constant vigil over the lives and destinies of all the young girls coming to Hope's campus." Durfee, with her stern and serious yet humorous disposition, believed sincerely in this responsibility and wished to see all of her students continue in a path of Christian devotion.

Winifred Hackley was born on April 12, 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War. Her father was a lawyer and her childhood in Belleville, New York was privileged with education, initially through private teachers at home. She was often ill and was "considered a frail child" who could not safely leave home very often. When she was twelve years old, Durfee entered public school for the first time. She attended high school at Union Academy in her hometown.



Winifred Hackley at age 16

Her college career, however, was fairly sporadic and she attended only in short intervals. She enrolled in Oberlin College in Ohio, but left after only a year. During her brief stay at Oberlin, Durfee studied French and minored in English. She was also enrolled in botany and pipe-organ lessons, but languages were her focus and she also took German courses during her brief college experience. Although her time at Oberlin was limited, she fondly remembered her days there. "Oberlin College," she wrote, "was my ideal of a Christian college, in both administration and atmosphere."

After leaving Oberlin, Winifred Hackley taught school in North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and New York before marrying Abner Durfee in 1892, at the age of thirty-one. The two probably had met in high school, as Abner was a part of Winifred's graduating class. She temporarily put her teaching career on hold and tried to start a family, but sadly, the Durfees' two children died at young ages. Abner worked as a traveling salesman for a hardware company, a job that kept him busy and away from Winifred and their home, so she resumed her teaching career.

When Abner Durfee died of a stroke in 1901, leaving Winifred a widow without any children, she returned to her education at the University of New York and finally obtained a degree in French with a minor in English, the same program she had started at Oberlin. At age forty, she still had much career potential. By 1908, she had finished her degree and in 1909 she made a cross-country move to accept a new position at Hope College.

At that time, Hope College was a small denominational school in the western United States. However, the college was looking to expand and recruit students from farther away. In terms of increasing enrollment, Hope was particularly interested in recruiting the growing number of women beginning to seek college educations. Hope had admitted women since 1874 but the female contingent remained small and locally based.

The position of Dean of Women had been created in 1887, but the title was not used until 1907. The Dean was appointed to oversee the activities of Hope's female students. Christina Van Raalte Gilmore, the daughter of Holland's founder A. C. Van Raalte, was the first Dean of Women. In 1907, Voorhees Hall had been built to house the female students and Gilmore had resided in the hall along with the women. Upon her retirement,

Hope was searching for a new Dean to take over her duties, but they sought an individual who would also be qualified to teach in the English Department.

Winifred Durfee possessed no previous experience as a Dean and had only a bachelor's degree and several years of experience teaching French and English. Coming from the less-rustic eastern United States and having no Dutch ancestry to speak of, Durfee stood out among the Holland population.

Durfee's new home of Voorhees Hall was still in an experimental stage, having been built only two years before. As an all-female dormitory, it had remained relatively empty for several years, as the number of women students remained low. This prompted questions from some as to whether the efforts to attract a higher female enrollment were worthwhile. More women were arriving every year, however, and by 1920, the hall was filled to capacity.



Voorhees Hall when it opened in 1907

As Dean, Durfee supervised the activities of the women living in Voorhees, a responsibility which necessitated her residence with them in the hall. She was to act as a "house mother" who would enforce the college and dormitory rules, but also guide the women through their college career. In addition, she was appointed as an Instructor in English, so her days were spent teaching and her evenings were filled with activities in Voorhees Hall.

During her career at Hope, Durfee retained her duties as Dean of Women, but her teaching schedule changed continuously. By the time of her retirement, Durfee had taught "Freshman and Sophomore English, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Drama and all four years of French." Despite her busy teaching schedule, however, she also spent much time with her students. From the beginning, Durfee strove to make an impact upon the lives of the young women she supervised.

The Hope College Winifred Durfee knew was very different from the institution we know today. When she arrived for the 1909-1910 school year, there were only eighteen faculty members, and each department had only one or two professors. Although the full professors had come to Hope with master's degrees or Ph.D.'s, instructors were required to have only a bachelor's degree. There were only two women on the staff and both were employed as instructors. The student body consisted of only 115 students, with forty-two freshmen. Compared to today, Hope's classes were much smaller, class choices much more limited, and the number of electives offered was significantly less.



Durfee (standing, third from left) with the faculty in 1910

Campus social life was also quite different, with a limited number of distinct student-run organizations and extracurricular activities. Only a few literary societies and Christian groups existed, most of which were available only for men. Voorhees, as the women's hall, was the center of campus social life, as it included a reception room downstairs. Voorhees also featured the only dining room on campus and the classrooms for the school of music.

One of the most important aspects of Durfee's position was enforcing the rules for the women in her hall. In the Hope catalog, the administration advertised that room and board included "a dean of women and her assistants" in order to ensure "constant care and supervision." In the early 1900s, such an assurance helped comfort parents who were nervous about sending their daughters away to school. Part of this guaranteed "care and supervision" was that the Voorhees residents would be instructed and required to behave as proper Christian ladies. As Durfee was known to be a dignified lady herself, the college council considered her perfect for such a task.

Durfee set about enforcing codes of behavior outlined in the "Regulations for Voorhees Hall." Rules of this sort may seem archaic by today's standards, but during Durfee's era, following such directions was normal. "There shall be no loud talking, whistling, singing, nor running in the corridors," was one such rule, as well as "Dancing is not permitted at the hall."

Students had to ask permission to leave the hall, rooms were required to be "neat and ready for inspection at all times," and rules for contact between men and women were strictly observed. Young men could stay in the hall for only certain hours after meal times or come to receive their dates in the front lobby. However, Voorhees residents had to remember that "Monday and Tuesday nights shall be dateless nights for Freshmen. Tuesday night shall be a dateless night for all."

Durfee had very particular opinions on the behavior of the women under her care. She believed that she, as an Eastern lady, was able to act as a type of missionary to the "less sophisticated" women of Michigan. Remembered as "well groomed and tastefully dressed," Durfee took her role as the example for her students seriously. She also had the difficult task of enforcing rules and regulations that were starting to become outdated by the time she retired in 1936.

For example, dancing and card playing were beginning to be permitted at other Christian schools, but Durfee remained committed to more traditional values. "I have wondered," she wrote to officials at her alma mater Oberlin College, "whether we are old fogies here at Hope College, to try to resist the growing demand for dancing on the part of our students."

With the issue arising of whether Hope women should become "collegiate," in other words, if they should act like the female students of other, larger schools, Durfee took a strong stance against the idea. "If to be 'collegiate' means to look like the horrible creatures on the magazine covers, to smoke cigarettes, to carry a

flask, to take wild night rides, to visit cabarets and roadhouses, then I suggest that they remain forever uncollegiate,” she observed.



Mrs. Durfee on campus

Her ideas may seem outdated now, but in her time, Durfee was well-respected by her faculty colleagues and the students of Hope. She made many improvements in the hall, transforming it from a sparse dormitory and giving it a well-decorated, home-like atmosphere. Local women’s societies donated money to the cause of helping the Hope women to have a pleasant place to live and Durfee appreciated every adjustment to the dormitory that had become her home.

Durfee was also remembered for her vigilant watch over everything that went on in the hall and being the presence necessary to keep the students in line. As imposing as she could be, however, Durfee was also known for her sense of humor. Even with all of the regulations in place for the women of Voorhees, students still knew how to break the rules. Male students would sneak their dates in through dining room windows left open by an accomplice before lights-out.

There are even stories of men making it into their girlfriends’ rooms, only to have to hide amid the dust under the bed when Mrs. Durfee conspicuously entered the room. Durfee was strict, but she would not always directly confront violations by the Voorhees residents. Instead, a former student later remembered that “Mrs. Durfee would subtly refer to the incident at a later date, knowing full well that we knew exactly what she meant, and that we were putting nothing over on her.”

Durfee was in charge of both discipline and the social life of Voorhees Hall. She gave teas and receptions for the residents and their families. Voorhees Day, in celebration of the donor of the hall, was an anticipated formal event each year. Durfee was also active in the Young Women’s Christian Association, one of the few organizations for women on campus. Drama became her other passion at Hope, and she directed many of the students’ plays. Since drama was not an established academic subject at the time, all of the dramatic studies took place on a volunteer basis and Durfee supervised the emerging department.

When Voorhees Hall was first built and the college had difficulty filling it to capacity, rooms were offered to unmarried professors and staff and English Professor J. B. Nykerk, along with several other faculty members, moved in. As more and more women arrived to fill the hall, however, Nykerk refused to leave with the rest of the faculty boarders, remaining in the hall well into retirement. His constant presence in Voorhees irritated Durfee, who wanted the rooms he occupied to be made available for more students.

Although she did not have many close acquaintances at Hope, Durfee did forge a relationship of proximity with fellow English professor and Dean of Men Nykerk. Now known as the founder of the Nykerk Cup competition, Nykerk was in his time an eccentric man. Teaching the same subject and living in the same hall, Nykerk and

Durfee ended up spending much of their time together. When Durfee first arrived, they even co-taught a class of Sophomore English.



Professor Nykerk in front of Graves Hall, 1905

The two Deans were remembered for their continuous bickering. Both of the professors of rhetoric enjoyed a friendly rivalry concerning who possessed the superior grammar skills. Even for all of their arguments, however, Nykerk's refusal to move out of the hall did prove useful when he helped Durfee to put out a fire that threatened the hall. In the end, she came to be rather fond of the man, even to the point of worrying over his welfare. During a trip to New York, she wrote back to then-President Edward Dimment to ensure "that you are looking after Dean Nykerk, and seeing that he does not over-eat and over-sleep." Eventually, the two Deans retired and left Voorhees in the same year.

"Believing that you need fresh young blood in your faculty, some one up-to-date, and with higher accomplishments than I possess," Winifred Durfee resigned her post in 1936. Her departure marked the end of an era at Hope. Durfee's residents remembered her fondly after her resignation. They recalled an "unusual combination—a perfect gentlewoman and a good sport."

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Photographs courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.

This project grew out of my own recognition that the Hope community could be enriched by an examination of the lives of notable persons in Hope's history. Words like "Phelps," "Dykstra," and "Kollen" are in constant use around campus but often with little understanding of the people behind the names. A knowledge of the people whose names we use in everyday conversation can serve to reconnect us with our heritage, as well as acquainting us with past and present visions for Hope College. At the suggestion and encouragement of several members of the Hope community, my idea evolved into a study of the eleven residence hall "ancestors."

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If you would like to learn more about all the individuals for whom the other ten residence halls have been named, visit [www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls](http://www.hope.edu/student/residential/halls) and click on each building. For more information about the history of Hope College, visit the Joint Archives of Holland at 9 East 10<sup>th</sup> St.

*Laura Shears, August 2008*